DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 260 954 SO 016 403

AUTHOR Nelson, Jack L.
TITLE Upton Sinclair and the New Critics of Education.
PUB DATE Nov 84
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council for the Social Studies (64th, Washington, DC, November 15-19, 1984). Print is blurred.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Capitalism; *Educational Change; *Educational History; *Educational Needs; *Educational Quality; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; Literary Styles; Research Needs; Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS Muckraking; *New Criticism; *Sinclair (Upton)

ABSTRACT

Upton Sinclair's critique of education is examined, and what today's critics of education can learn from him is discussed. Sinclair is an example of deep or new critics of education who deal with more than surface blemishes and relate school criticism to deeper social issues like justice. In 1922 Sinclair conducted personal interviews with educators throughout the United States. He called public attention to root problems in schooling, academic freedom, and corporate society through a rough journalistic style and muckraking. For example, Sinclair's book "The Goose-step" is filled with straightforward comments on specific colleges where he identified linkages to industrialists and cozy relations between big business and academia. Sinclair identified specific industrialists and capitalists as behind-the-scene manipulators of higher education. This basic criticism of capitalist greed and manipulation as detrimental to education is also a theme common to current deep critics of education. Current critics can learn much from Sinclair. They should conduct another cross-country personal study today and report their findings using Sinclair's clear and straightforward identification of evils. (RM)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Jack L. Nelson
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ED260954

SP 016 403

UPTON SINCLAIR AND THE NEW CRITICS OF EDUCATION *

Presentation, CUFA/NCSS, November, 1984. Washington, DC

Jack L. Nelson
Graduate School of Education
Rutgers University
New Brunswick, NJ 08903

The spate of reports, analyses, studies and diatribes about the ills of education may appear to be a recent phenomenon in the public arena. As is well known in educational scholarship, however, attacks on the schools have occcurred since we have had schools. There is a pattern of attacks, virtually cyclical, which reaches public awareness and arouses concern that something should be done; there is a similarity between these cycles and the seventeen-year locust infestations, though the time period may vary for school criticism. The last statement may sound as though the theme of this paper is to decry criticism about schools, or provide a defense of martyrdom for schooling. That is not the theme; rather, the idea of a long history of educational criticism, with public awareness only sporadically aroused, is important to the context of this paper. The theme is better stated that mainstream criticism of schooling has been too narrow in scope and too shallow in effort to adequately challenge the root causes of schooling problems.

The typical cycle of mainstream school criticism shifts from moderately right wing concern for teaching traditional knowledge and keeping order to moderately left wing concern for liberal ideas of community and equality. The standard scenario of public debate incorporates a clarion call by one side to defects in schools like lowered reading abilities,

*Portions of this paper drawn from an article in Upton Sinclair Quarterly by Jack L. Nelson. (1983)

lack of discipline, elimination of traditional required content or values, and threats to established authority. The public is outraged, at least as reported, and the schools shift modestly to a different rhetoric and some cosmetic changes. Then, several years later, another call to arms is sounded by a different set of critics who note the restrictive nature of schools, the censored and dull content, memorization and drill, and lack of individual development. The public clamors and the schools slide over to use a different language and to appear more open and free.

There are some long term and fairly dramatic changes in schooling and society which are more evident in hindsight and which are significant, e.g., democratization of schooling, public financing and support, attempted integration and opposition to bias. But the school critics who have access to the public often seek only minor modifications at any one time period, and seldom look beyond relatively obvious school characteristics to disclaim: test scores, required courses, teacher credentials, textbooks, drop-out rates, etc. There are few mainstream critics who relate school criticism to deeper social issues like justice. Thus, there are few popularly known critics of schooling who deal with more than surface blemishes.

In earlier time periods one might have identified some deep critics who were able to obtain public exposure to their concerns. This might include Thomas Jefferson, John Dewey, and George Counts. In more recent times the deep critics of schooling seem to derive their roots from european intellectuals with social analyses drawn from Marxian, neo-Marxian

critical theory or other perspectives. There are nearly as many variations among them as there are advocates, but the essential point is that the efforts of these critics derive from a philosophic or political-economic base beyond surface school phenomena. They challenge the functionalist or other traditional rationales for schooling, rather than criticize from within that rationale.

These new critics of education, unfortunately, tend to fall outside the mainstream of public or standard educationist literature, and their criticisms are often shared only with those already initiated into that perspective. There could be some of these new critics who are known outside their own circles, but I can't identify any known currently in the public sphere, or whose ideas are material in public discourse about schools. The ideas of new critics of education merit consideration, especially in a social climate where schools are again a public issue.

Some of the reason for public ignorance of these ideas is the mere threat of them to powerful segments of the social order; another is that the ideas are too esoteric and have yet to develop a clear practical derivation for changing schools; another is that the critics may be operating only from the negative without providing a consistent alternative; and a further reason may be that the manner of communication of these ideas is so heavily weighted by jargon and convoluted writing that they are easily overlooked in public discussion.

Thus, an examination of one of the school critics who seemed to operate from a deep concern for the substructure of society, who understood political economy, and who wrote in a way to incite the common people

to an understanding of the issue of social justice would seem worthy of contemplation. Upton Sinclair was such a critic. His book, The Jungle, became a classic in muckraking with a positive result. His prolific authorship, and public displays in political campaigns and other efforts to address areas he identified as significant, made him an important figure in his time. While he was not a scholar in the normal sense of the term, nor an educator in its normative characteristic, Upton Sinclair was able to call public attention to root problems in schooling, academic freedom, and corporate society through a rough journalistic style and muckraking, avenues not travelled by recent critics of schools.

Recent criticism of society and education appears to ignore the contributions of Sinclair. Yet his work is strikingly parallel with both practical and theoretical current analyses by scholars. Sinclair is, of course, not the only social critic whose writings are ignored by latter-day discoverers of evil in the schools, but he offers a rich source of insight, data, method and perspective that could enliven, enlighten and enrich the current debates.

Mary Sinclair, his wife, described his study of schools in political economic terms:

> After Upton has finished his crusade against the "kept press, it was the turn of "kept" education. In the wave of repressive terror which had swept the country after the war, no group had suffereddd more than the educators. From the highest-salaried professor in the richest university down to the poorest paid teacher in the smallest country school, all were under governing board made up of businessmes determined to see that no teacher should suggest any social change that might threaten profits. The study of economics must be confined to the wonders of big business... (M. Sinclair, 1962, p. 269)

Upton Sinclair described his awakening to this same topic:

> ...I had been through five years of City College and four years of postgraduate work at Columbia, and had come out unaware that the modern socialist movement existed. So now I meant to muckrake the college, showing where athey had got their money and how they were spending it... (Sinclair, Autobiography, 1962, p. 225)

And Leon Harris' (1975) analysis of Upton Sinclair's work in this area provides the following comments:

> Upton returned from his cross-country tour [of colleges and schools] with two passionate convictions. The first was that educating so many millions inevitably offered frequently irresistible opportunities for dishonest financial gain and that such opportunities must be ended or at least made far more difficult. The second and most important (sic) was that the kind of education determined the kind of citizen - that if American society was to move in the different direction he hoped for, its members would have to receive a very different education.... (p.202)

> He [Sinclair] had the impertinence more than half a century ago to be outraged that Columbia University owned securities in enterprises made profitable by the exploitation of human beings... Nor did he limit his charges to Columbia... (p.204)

Harris also indicated one of the problems that muckraking style has in his comment that Sinclair's books on education had less "exaggeration and paranoia" leading to "foolish conclusions that brought ridicule on him [Sinclair] and made it easier to avoid his valid charges." (p.204)

There are important distinctions between the work of academic scholars and professional muckrakers. Scholars attempt reasoned and evidential argument to seek truth, leaving conclusions open and tentative; muckraking seems to start with conclusions and seek evidence for support. Scholars, however, have been known to take this latter route, and muckrakers do reason. The muckraking style may cause some scholars to pause rather than to consider seriously the kind of statement that Sinclair uses to make a point:

"There are some fifteen hundred men on the Columbia faculty; but you can count upon the fingers of one hand the men of any originality and force of character." (Sinclair, 1922, p. 52)

And Sinclair's writing about the "interlocking directorate" in higher education, and its impact on elementary and secondary schools, bears a similar emotive style:

"[Columbia's President]...fixed the policy of this department [of Education], making it a machine for the turning out of 'educational experts', trained to see life as a battleground of money-ambition; and to run the schools as efficient factories... I shall...show you the Tammany Hall of education; the league of superintendents, and the politicians of the National Education Association, financed by the book companies and other big grafters and combining with the chambers of commerce and professional patriots to drive out liberalism in education as in politics, and resist every new idea in every department of human thought and activity. They are backed by the political machines of special privilege..." (Sinclair 1922, p. 58, 59)

These examples from Sinclair's The Goose-step are not isolated bits; the book is filled with his straightforward comments on Columbia, Harvard, Ohio State, Cornell, Stanford, and a variety of other colleges where he identified linkages to industrialists and cozy relations between big business and academia.

Sinclair's comments about education come from an extended study of schools across the U.S. As Harris notes in his biography, Sinclair originally planned to use teacher and administration responses to letters as the basis for a book he initially titled "Footbinder" or "The Footbinders," but so few school people responded that Sinclair undertook a long trip to conduct personal interviews. According to Harris, Sinclair returned from the trip with two dominant convictions: "that

educating so many millions inevitably offered frequent irresistible opportunities for dishonest financial gain and...the second and most important was that the kind of education determined the kind of citizen - that if American society was to move in the different direction [Sinclair] hoped for, its members would have to receive a very different education." (Harris, p. 202)

Sinclair notes that he visited about thirty cities where "some educator had assembled the malcontents in his or her home, and I sat and made notes while they told me their angry or hilarious stories." (Sinclair, 1962, p. 225) He had set out to "muckrake the colleges, showing where they had got their money and how they were spending it," and returned home with so much material that he decided one book on education would not be sufficient. The Goose-step, all 488 pages published by Sinclair in 1922, sold for two dollars and covered higher education; The Goslings, at 454 pages and also two dollars, was on the lower schools.

Sinclair was warned about libel suits over his caustic statements about the dominant leaders of higher education, especially Nicholas Murray Butler, and the circle of industrialists and capitalists whom Sinclair identifies as behind-the-scenes manipulators of higher education. H.L. Menken, in a letter to Sinclair in 1923, suggests that such suits were unlikely because, "They all know that getting into court would lay them open to even worse exposure." (Menken, in Sinclair, 1960, p. 234) No libel action arose, but the continuous threat was a recognition of the popular muckraking writing style which Sinclair did so well.

The style of writing now fashionable among a group of academic educational critics does not match Sinclair for directness or personal attack, yet the bases for criticism are similar. Earlier educational critics identified philosophic or psychological points for dispute; one finds previous critics who show the logical inconsistency of democratic political philosophy and autocratic schools (Dewey, 1916), or critics who decry the stultification of children on essentially psychological grounds (Holt, 1967).

The more recent educational critics have centered on economic or socioeconomic conditions and their impact upon the schools. These criticisms are larger scale, since they indict the capitalist system, but are certainly consistent with Sinclair's analysis in The Goose-step.

Much of the current critical literature is an extension of Marxist and neo-Marxist interpretations of society as applied to the institution of education. Thus, the economic prism for examining schooling incorporates a basic criticism of capitalism. Also, American critics have derived much of their analytic framework from European intellectuals like Jurgens Habermas, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci, as well as such pertinent British sociologists of education as Geoff. Whitty and Michael F.D. Young. (Besag and Nelson, 1984).

Among the more prominent examples of educational criticism from a perspective similar to that expressed by Sinclair are the works of Bowles and Gintis, Schooling in Capitalist America (1976); Michael Apple, Ideology and Curriculum; and Martin Carnoy, Schooling in a Corporate Society. As their titles suggest, these books show the direct

relationship of an economic system and its ideology on the process of schooling in that society. While the interlocking directorate described and detailed with names of individuals by Upton Sinclair is not the prime subject of these works, certainly the basic criticism of capitalist greed and manipulation as detrimental to education is a theme common to Sinclair and these books.

For examples of the criticisms, and the writing style used by these academic analysts, consider the following by Henry Giroux, Professor of Education at

> "In a nutshell, the dialectic of domination and resistance, the notion that schools are neither the exclusive locus of domination nor resistance but a combination of both is missing in the reproductive position. One result is that human experience is simply reduced to a passive reflex of the ideological imperatives of the logic of capital and its institutions." (Giroux, in press)

Perhaps more directly Samuel Bowles, an economics professor at the University of Massachusetts, writes:

> "...I argue (1) that schools have evolved in the United States not as a pursuit of equality, but rather to meet the needs of capitalist employers for a disciplined and skilled labor force...unequal education has its roots in the very class structure which it serves to legitimize and reproduce. Inequalities in education are part of the web of capitalist society, and are likely to persist as long as capitalism survives." (Bowles, in Carnoy, 1975, p. 38)

And a similar economic analysis is applied to school curriculum and questions of knowledge by Michael Apple, Professor of Education at the University of Wisconsin.

"Questions about the selective tradition such as the following need to be taken quite seriously. Whose knowledge is it? Who selected it? Why is it organized and taught in this way? To this particular group?...One is guided, as well, by attempting to link these investigations to competing conceptions of social and economic power and ideologies. In this way, one can begin to get a more concrete appraisal of the linkages between economic and political power and the knowledge made available (and not made available) to students." (Apple, 1979, p. 7)

The new critical perspectives on education use a different writing style, and a different general intellectual framework from Upton Sinclair, but Sinclair's criticisms are strikingly similar. Sinclair writes in 1922, "Our educational system is not a public service, but an instrument of special privilege; its purpose is not to further the welfare of mankind, but merely to keep America capitalist." (Sinclair, 1922, p. 18)

Sinclair does not hesitate, indeed he seems to thoroughly enjoy, naming individuals and institutions who illustrate the interlocking directorate of the plutocrats and their control over education. The current critics are considerably more circumspect, using large scale evidence and commonly known school experience to support their positions.

There is a need for educational critics to rediscover the muckraker's work, and to expand and embellish it. A trenchant and compelling new view of education might arise from the blending of the two related perspectives and the two writing styles. Certainly a larger audience is reached by clear and straightforward identification of evils, while simple sensationalism is properly tempered by a scholar's distance and skepticism. In any case it would be a service to the study of education

to have one or more of the current educational critics undertake a replica of the cross-country personal study of schools made by Sinclair in 1922.

References

Apple, Michael. Ideology and Curriculum. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979.

Besag, Frank and Jack L. Nelson. Foundations of Education: Stasis and Change. NY:Random House, 1984.

Carnoy, Martin. Schooling in a Corporate Society. NY: David McKay,1975.

Dewey, John. Democracy and Education. NY:Macmillan, 1916.

Giroux, Henry. "Schooling and the Politics of Everyday Life: Notes Toward a Critical Theory of Pedagogy", Social Text, in press.

Harris, Leon. Upton Sinclair: American Rebel. NY: Thos. Crowell, 1975.

Holt, John. Why Children Learn. NY:Pitman, 1967.

Mencken, H.L. Letter to Upton Sinclair, in Sinclair, My Lifetime in Letters. Columbia, MO:University of Missouri Press, 1960, p.234.

Sinclair, Mary Craig. Southern Belle. Phoenix, AR:Sinclair Press, 1957,1962.

Sinclair, Upton. The Autobiography of Upton Sinclair. NY:Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962.

Sinclair, Upton. The Goose-step. Pasadena, CA:Self-published. 1922.

Sinclair, Upton. The Goslings. Pasadena, CA: Self-published, 1924.

Young, Michael F.D. Knowledge and Control. London:Collier-Macmillan, 1971.